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A LETTER
FROM THE COMMITTEE OF THE
ASSOCIATION OF NEW YORK
TO THE LORD MAYOR AND
CORPORATION OF THE
CITY OF LONDON

5TH MAY, 1775

PRINTED UNDER THE DIRECTION OF THE LIBRARY COMMITTEE
OF THE CORPORATION

1920

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PREFATORY NOTE

The document here reproduced in facsimile by the Library Committee may claim an especial interest in the present year, as illustrating the remarkable changes which have taken place in international relations. Even recently it would have seemed a prophecy impossible of fulfilment that the soldiers of the United States of America should be campaigning in Europe, or that the City of London should be called upon to offer its traditional courtesies to the French, American, and British Commanders-in-Chief, fresh from their common victories on the soil of France. But as notable as the re-grouping of Powers is the growth of friendly sentiment. The visits of the French and American Presidents were marked by the spontaneous expression of respect and friendship, the warmth and sincerity of which were equalled in the welcome lately accorded to H.R.H. the Prince of Wales in America. Yet less than a century and a half ago the British Government was attempting to subdue the revolt of the American colonies, while the French and Spanish fleets were harrying her oversea communications. The City of London, for its part, was in the forefront of the movement for constitutional reform, and was using all means within its power to effect peace between the colonies and the mother-country. The appeal from the Committee of the Association of New York in 1775 to the Lord Mayor and Corporation of the City of London, may be set by the side of the City's recent congratulations to the American leaders as interesting lesser landmarks in History, between which lie the birth and maturity of a world-power.

In explaining the origin of the Committee's letter, it may not be out of place to remark that there is at once a great similarity and a profound difference between the War of American Independence and the European War of 1914-18. Though no war is fought on a single issue, both struggles will probably be classed by historians as Wars of Freedom. The difference is exemplified by the part played by the City in the earlier conflict. Whereas in 1914, Germany seems to have been a nation united and eager for a war of domination, and the French and British equally united to withstand her, the War of Independence was in no true sense a war between the American and British peoples. Except for a strain of Dutch blood in New York, and other slighter elements, American and Briton were of the same race and associations.

The line of division was in fact not national but political, passing not only through communities but even between the members of families. As the idea of separation took shape numbers of colonists after a difficult decision ranked themselves as "loyalist." On the other hand in England, the merchants of London were throughout in sympathy with the colonists and deplored the war, Lord Chatham denounced the arbitrary measures of the Government and the Earl of Effingham resigned his commission in the Army rather than draw his sword against the lives and liberties of his fellow-subjects, being thanked for his action by the Livery of the ancient City Guilds of London "in Common Hall assembled" in Guildhall. In the House of Lords a protest against the Act prohibiting commerce with the colonies, signed by the Dukes of Richmond and Manchester, the Marquis of Rockingham, the Earls of Abingdon and Fitzwilliam, and Lords Ponsonby, Abergavenny and Chedworth contains the words—"The English on both sides of the Atlantic are now being taught by Act of Parliament to look on themselves as separate nations, nations susceptible of general hostility and proper parties for mutual declarations of war and treaties of peace. We are by this Act preparing their minds for that independence which we charge them with affecting, whilst we drive them to the necessity of it by repeated injuries."

While it is thus evident that not all the colonists were desirous of independence, nor all Britons resolute to deny it, a comparison of American and British writings of the time suggests further that the War was but the expression in violence of a general constitutional struggle, in which both the colonist and the British reformer were in conflict with the same system and had similar grievances. Dr. R. R. Sharpe, late Records Clerk of the Corporation, has traced in detail in "London and the Kingdom," the efforts of the City to uphold the Revolution Settlement, to maintain the liberty of the subject, and to secure a proper representation of the people, during the 70 years which preceded the Reform Bill of 1832. His account brings out clearly the leadership assumed by the City and the importance attached to it by Court and Parliament. From phase to phase of the movement, the petitions and remonstrances of the Livery and the Common Council, though loyal and respectful to the Sovereign, display a remarkable boldness in defining his powers and in criticising Ministers and Parliament. At no time was the conflict more intense than in the ten years before the War of Independence, when Wilkes, the notorious editor of No. 45 of the *North Briton*, supported both by the Corporation and by the citizens as a whole, was maintaining the liberty of the Press and the sanctity of personal rights.

Meanwhile the Colonies had been roused by a series of arbitrary and ill-considered Customs Acts, designed rather to assert the authority of Parliament than to make any real contribution to the revenue. As many of the Americans were descended from men who had left their native land in search of religious and political freedom, colonial feeling was extremely sensitive in the matter, and the legitimate efforts of officials to carry out the law and preserve order were easily construed as tyranny and oppression. The colonists felt that they were taking their part in the general defence of liberty.

Every incident of the struggle in the City had been followed with the keenest interest. When Alexander MacDougal, whose signature appears in the appeal, was arrested in 1770 for a malicious libel against the Lieutenant-Governor, the Council and General Assembly of New York, he was acclaimed as "a second Wilkes," and the tedium of his imprisonment was relieved by visitors in parties of 45 in compliment to the famous number of the *North Briton*. As time went on the resistance of the colonists hardened, in proportion as the design of the British Government to school them became more evident. The obnoxious customs had been removed in 1770, but that on tea was retained, "since the conduct of the Americans had been such as to prevent an entire compliance with their wishes." Matters began to look very grave in 1774. The throwing of the cargoes of tea into Boston Harbour in 1773 produced the Boston Port Act of 1774, transferring the commerce of Boston to Salem. In September the first Continental Congress, attended by delegates from all the colonies, decided that commercial intercourse with great Britain should be suspended until their grievances were redressed.

The seriousness of the situation had been early appreciated by the City. Already in 1770 Alderman Trecothick had pleaded in Parliament for the entire abolition of the customs. The Common Council petitioned against the Quebec Bill, and protested against the Bill for cutting off the inhabitants of Massachusetts Bay and other places from the Newfoundland Fisheries as "contrary to many of the fundamental principles of the English Constitution." They warned the Government that "the utmost confusion was to be expected, as it cannot be supposed that a great number of men naturally hardy and brave will quietly submit to a Law which will reduce them almost to famine." The Livery in a Petition to the King on April 5, 1775 pointed out the ruinous effect on commerce of the governmental policy, and were so bold as to say: "Not deceived by the specious artifice of calling Despotism—Dignity, your petitioners plainly perceive that the real purpose is to establish arbitrary power over all America." Unfortunately their warnings were justified by events. On April 19th, 1775, a small column of British troops despatched to destroy stores at Concord fired into a party of "minute-men" assembled at Lexington Green, and was harassed on the return march by the local levies. This event, small in itself, marked a crisis—the transition from passive to active resistance. Its effect on colonial opinion is shown by the letter from the Committee of the Association of New York here reproduced.

During the preceding years the growing sense of grievance had resulted throughout the colonies in the creation of Committees of Correspondence, usually elected at public meetings. The New York Committee of Correspondence had been succeeded in November, 1774, by a Committee of Observation chosen to carry out the measures adopted by Congress at Philadelphia. So disturbed were conditions in New York after the Battle of Lexington that this Committee proposed the formation of an Association to prevent mob-rule and to support the civil authority. Accordingly on April 29th, the Articles of Association were read and signed at a public meeting by

over one thousand freeholders, freemen, and inhabitants of the City and County of New York, and a few days later the Committee of the Association, as nominated by the Committee of Observation, was elected by the ordinary voters in the wards. It was this body which now appealed to the City of London on the ground of the "warm attachment in the Capital of the Empire to the cause of Justice and Liberty." They affirmed their loyalty to the King and the love they bore to all their fellow-subjects in His Majesty's Realm and Dominions, they were willing, they said, as Englishmen, to make voluntary contributions to the King's needs, but having been born to the bright inheritance of English Freedom, including the free disposal of their property, they were "resolutely determined to defend it with their blood and to transfer it uncontaminated to their posterity." The whole address breathes the spirit of resolution and warning, but not of separation. Indeed many of the signatories were strongly conservative, ready to go far on the path of compromise for the sake of peace.

In London the immediate reception of this letter is little index to the general feeling of the citizens. The Livery next day, 24th June, voted a Remonstrance to the King, declaring that "every moment's prosecution of this fatal war may loosen irreparably the bonds of that connection on which the Glory and Safety of the British Empire depend." On the other hand the Common Council could secure only a small majority to petition for the immediate suspension of hostilities, and on July 14th a motion to reply to the letter from New York was lost. Personal loyalty to the King and the warping of judgment inevitably caused by bloodshed produced temporary fluctuations of feeling. But the underlying conviction of the tragedy and folly of the war remained with the citizens, and was expressed consistently in frequent petitions and addresses, and in speeches in Parliament, even when the country as a whole had veered in favour of the war. As in former remonstrances, the arbitrary conduct of the Government and the need of Parliamentary reform are strongly and eloquently enforced. But there is noticeable also the impatience of practical men who see blood and treasure wasted for no useful ends. As regards active measures, the City magistrates refused to back the warrants for the entry of press-gangs into the City and made every effort to prevent the suspension of the Habeas Corpus Acts against the Americans, while the Common Council refused to take any part in the subscription or in fact support the war in any way.

As hostilities dragged on, the logic of events began to produce those convictions in the nation which the more liberal-minded had long cherished. The entry of France and Spain into the arena gave a fillip to the war without exacerbating feeling against the Americans. National vanity could in fact rejoice in victory over the European Powers, which left no evil taste behind it, while defeat at the hands of the Americans was after all a family affair. The news of the capitulation of Cornwallis and his army at Yorktown merely caused the Livery to petition again for the cessation of "this unnatural and unfortunate war" which could only tend to the alienation of the American Colonies, with whom they still hoped to live on terms of intercourse and friendship. More than a trace of this feeling is evident in the peace negotiations. John Jay, a signatory to our document, who took

a leading part, discovered that his best weapon with the British Cabinet was the fact that French opinion foreshadowed very definite limits to the satisfaction of American claims in the final settlement. Practically all he demanded was conceded. On the signature of the peace preliminaries, the Common Council congratulated the King on his having paid "final attention" to the petitions of his faithful citizens and people, and expressed their firm conviction that the commercial interests of this country and of North America were inseparably united—a conviction with which the King in his answer declared his entire concurrence.

A final word may be said about the signatories of our document. The old Dutch element in New York is vouched by such names as Evert Bancker, David Beekman, Cornelius Clopper, Peter T. Curtenius, Evert Duyckinck, Henry Remsen, and Isaac Roosevelt, a direct ancestor of the late President. Several of these families are still flourishing in the United States to-day. Peter Theobaldus Curtenius, a New York merchant, became a Commissary-General, with the rank of Colonel under the Provincial Congress, and freely expended his private means in the service. Huguenot blood is represented by John Jay, who deservedly ranks as one of the greatest American statesmen, and by John de Lancey, descended from a noble French family of Caen. Members of the latter family were to be found on either side, two of the de Lanceys being brilliant cavalry leaders among the loyalists, while a branch which settled in England produced distinguished officers in the British Army. The majority of the names, however, are of British origin. Isaac Low, the chairman of the Association, though ardent in defence of colonial liberties, was opposed to the demand for independence, and on the confiscation of his property retired to England, where he died. Francis Lewis, who was educated at Westminster School under the care of his uncle, the Dean of St. Paul's, afterwards becoming a substantial merchant of New York, and a member of Congress, had an interesting career, in the course of which he served against the French and Indians in 1752, and undertook many adventurous voyages in his own ships. A notable colonial family was that of the Livingstons, descended from a Scottish Presbyterian divine who died in exile in Rotterdam in 1672. It produced many distinguished Americans, of whom Philip, the signatory, was a leading figure in the movement for independence and a member of Congress. He founded a Divinity Professorship at Yale, and was one of the originators of the Columbia University of New York. James Duane, like John Jay, was a lawyer, and was associated with him in the many efforts made by the more conservative reformers to find some means of accommodation with the mother-country in the period before the Declaration of Independence. The colonial forces are represented by Colonel John Lasher, who commanded a Grenadier company of the New York troops, having as a Lieutenant Abraham Brasher, the author of many of the popular ballads of the Revolutionary period. His "Another New Year's Address" and "General's Trip to Morristown" were favourite songs round American camp-fires.

My Lord and Gentlemen

Committee Chamber New York ^{the} 5 May 1775

(Distinguished as you are, by your noble exertions in the Cause of Liberty, and deeply interested in the expiring Commerce of the Empire: you necessarily command the most respectful attention. The general Committee of Association for the City and County of New York beg leave therefore to address you, and the Capital of the British Empire, thro' its Magistrates on the Subject of American wrongs. Born to the bright inheritance of English Freedom, the Inhabitants of this extensive Continent, cannot submit to the Ignominious yoke, nor move in the galling Fetters of Slavery. The Disposal of their own Property with perfect Spontaneity, and in a manner wholly disgested of every appearance of Constraint, is their indefeasible Birthright. This exalted Blessing, they are resolutely determined to defend with their Blood, and Transfer it uncontaminated to their Posterity.

You will not then wonder at their early Sealousy of the design to erect in this Land of Liberty, a Despotism scarcely to be paralleled in the pages of Antiquity, or the Volumes of modern times; a Despotism consisting in Power assumed by the Representatives of a part of his Majesty's Subjects, at their Sovereign will and Pleasure to strip the Rest of their Property. And what are the Engines of Administration to Execute this destructive Project? The Duty on Tea; Oppressive Restraints on the

Commerce of the Colonies; the Blockade of the Port of Boston; the Change of Internal Police in the Massachusetts, and Quebec; the Establishment of Popery in the latter; the Extension of its Bounds; the Ruin of our Indian Commerce by Regulations calculated to aggrandize that arbitrary Government; unconstitutional Admiralty Jurisdiction throughout the Colonies; the Invasion of our Right to a Trial in the most capital Cases by a Jury of the Vicinage; the horrid Contrivance to screen from Punishment the bloody Executions of ministerial Vengeance; and, not to mention the rest of the black Catalogue of our Grievances, the hostile Operations of an Army, who have already shed the Blood of our Countrymen. The Struggles excited by the detestable Stamp Act, have so lately Demonstrated to the world that Americans will not be Slaves, that we stand astonished at the gross Impolicy of the Minister. Recent Experience has convinced that the Possessors of this extensive Continent would never submit to a Tax by Pretence of legislative authority in Britain: Disguise therefore became the Expedient. In pursuit of the same end Parliament declared their absolute Supremacy over the Colonies, and have already endeavoured to exercise that Supremacy in attempting to raise a Revenue under the specious Pretence of providing for their good Government and Defence. Administration to exhibit a degree of Moderation purely, ostensible and delusory, while they withdrew their hands from our most necessary articles of Importation, determined with an eager Grasp to hold the Duty on Tea, as a Badge of their Executive Power. Zealous on our part for an indissoluble union with the Parent State, studious to promote the Glory and Happiness of the Empire, Impressed with a just Sense of the

Necessity of a controuling Authority, to regulate and harmonize the discordant commercial Interests of its various parts; we cheerfully Submit to a Regulation of Commerce by the Legislature of the Parent State, excluding, in its nature every Idea of Taxation

[Whether, therefore, the present Machinations of arbitrary Power infallibly tend you may easily Judge: if unremitingly pursued, as they were inhumanly devised, they will by a fatal necessity terminate in a Total Dissolution of the Empire

The Subjects of this Country will not, we trust, be deceived by any Measures conciliatory in appearance, while it is evident that the Minister aims at a solid Revenue to be raised by grievous and oppressive Acts of Parliament, and by fleets and Armies employed to enforce their Execution. They never will, we believe, submit to an Auction in the Colonies for the more effectual Augmentation of the Revenue, by holding it up as a Temptation to them that the highest bidder shall enjoy the greatest share of Governmental favour. This plan, as it would tend to sow the seeds of Discord, would be far more dangerous than hostile force, in which we hope the King's Troops will ever be, as they have already been, unsuccessful. Instead of those unusual extraordinary and unconstitutional modes of procuring Taxes from the Subject, should his Majesty graciously be pleased, upon suitable Emergencies, to make requisitions in antient form. The Colonies have expressed their willingness to contribute to the support of the Empire; but to contribute of their voluntary Gift as Englishmen; and when our unexampled Grievances are redressed, our Prince will find his American Subjects testifying on all proper Occasions, by a

ample aids as their circumstances will permit, the most unshaken fidelity to their Sovereign and inviolable attachment to the welfare of his realm and Dominions. Permit us further to assure you, that America is grown so irritable by Apprehension, that the least shock in any part, is by the most powerfull and Sympathetic affection ^{Instantaneously} felt thro the whole Continent. That Pennsylvania, Maryland, and New York have already stopped their exports to the Fishing Islands and those colonies which at this dangerous Juncture have refused to unite with their Brethren in the common cause; and all supplies to the navy and army at Boston; and that probably the day is at hand when our Continental Congress will totally shut up our Ports. The minions of Power here may now inform administration, if they can ever speak the Language of Truth, that this City is as one man in the cause of Liberty. That to this end our Inhabitants are almost unanimously Bound by the enclosed Association; That it is continually advancing to Perfection by additional Subscriptions; that they are resolutely bent on supporting their Committee, and the intended Provincial and Continental Congresses; That there is not the least Doubt of the efficacy of their Example in the other Counties; In short, that while the whole Continent are ardently wishing for peace, on such Terms as can be acceded to by Englishmen, they are indefatigable in preparing for the last appeal. That such are the Language and conduct of our Fellow Citizens will be further manifested by a Representation of the Lieutenant Governor and Council of the first Instant to General Gage at Boston, and to his Majesty's ministers by the Packet. assure yourselves, my Lord and Gentlemen, that we speak the real sentiments of the confederated

Colonies on the Continent from Nova Scotia ^{to Georgia} when we declare, That all the horrors
of a civil war will never compel America to submit to Taxation by authority of
Parliament

a Sincere Regard to the public weal, and the cause of Humanity, an hearty
desire to spare the further Effusion of human blood, our loyalty to our Prince, and the
Love we bear to all our fellow Subjects in his Majesty's Realm and Dominions, of a full
conviction of the warmest Attachment in the Capital of the Empire to the cause of Justice
and Liberty, have induced us to address you on this momentous Subject; confident
That the same cogent motives will induce the most vigorous exertions of the City of
London to restore union, mutual confidence and Peace to the whole Empire

We have the honor to be,

my Lord and Gentlemen,

your most obedient and

affectionate fellow Subjects
and Humble Serv^{ts}

Isaac Low. Chairman

John Jay

Fra^{ncis} Lewis

John Alsop

Chas. Livingston

Ja^{mes} Duane

Duykroon

Wm. Eton

William W. Ludders.

Cornelius Clapper

Wm. Brinckerhoff

Henry Rensen

Robert Day

West Branch

Joseph Totten

Allen Lott

David Wickman

Isaac Roosevelt.

Gabriel Whittow

Wm. Walton

Dan. Phenix.

Fred. Jay

Samuel Broome

John Delaney

Alex. Douglass

John Peade

Wm. W. W. W.

George Janeway

John White

Cap. W. Sudlow

John Lasker

Theophilus Anthony

Thos. Smith

Rich. Yates

Oliver Simpkins

Jacobus Van Zandt

Jeremiah Blath

Peter Hartenius

Robt. Benson

Ab. Prussner

